

NEW LIFE OF ABRAHAM

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MOST undoubtedly father Abraham is a personage whose history should command attention, if only because he figures as the founder of the Jewish race — a race which, having been promised protection and favor by Deity, appear in the large majority of cases to have experienced little else besides the sufferance of misfortune and misery themselves, or its infliction upon others. Men are taught to believe that God, following out a solemn covenant made with Abraham, suspended the course of nature to aggrandise the Jews; that he promised always to bless and favor them if they adhered to his worship and obeyed the priests. The promised blessings were usually: political authority, individual happiness and sexual power, long life, and great wealth; the threatened curses for idolatry or disobedience: disease, loss of property and children, mutilation, death. Amongst the blessings: the right to kill, plunder, and ravish their enemies, with protection, whilst pious, against any subjection to retaliatory measures. And all this because they were Abraham's children!

Abraham is especially an important personage to the orthodox Church-going Christian. Without Abraham, no Jesus, no Christianity, no Church of England, no bishops, no tithes, no church-rates. But for Abraham, England would have lost all these blessings. Abraham was the great-grandfather of Judah, the head of the tribe to which God's mother's husband, Joseph, belonged.

In gathering materials for a short biographical sketch, we are at once comforted and dismayed by the fact that the only reliable account of Abraham's career is that furnished by the book of Genesis, supplemented by a few brief references in other parts of the Bible, and that, outside "God's perfect and infallible revelation to man," there is no reliable account of Abraham's existence at all. We are comforted by the thought that, despite the new edition of the "Encyclopædia Britannica," Genesis is unquestioned by the faithful, and is at present protected by Church and State against heretic assaults; but we are dismayed when we think that, if Infidelity, encouraged by Colenso, Kalisch, Professor Robertson Smith, and Professor Wellhausen, upsets Genesis, Abraham will have little historical support. The Talmudical notices of Abraham are too wonderful for irreverent criticism. Some philologists have asserted that Brama and Abraham are alike corruptions of Abba Rama, or Abrama, and that Sarah is identical with Sarasvati. אַבְרָם, Abram, is a Chaldean compound, meaning father of the elevated, or exalted father. אַבְרָהָם is a compound of Chaldee and Arabic, signifying father of a multitude. In part v. of his work, Colenso mentions that Adonis was formerly identified with Abram, "high father," Adonis being the personified sun.

Leaving incomprehensible problems in philology for the ordinary authorised version of our Bibles, we find that Abraham was the son of Terah. The Talmud¹ says that Abraham's mother was Amathlai, the daughter of Karnebo (Bava Bathra, fol. 1, col. 1.) The text does not expressly state where Abraham was born, and I cannot therefore describe his birth-place with that accuracy of detail which a true believer might desire, but he "dwelt in old time on the other side of the flood" (Joshua xxiv, 2 and 3). Abraham was born when Terah, his father, was seventy years of age; and, according to Genesis, Terah and his family came forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and went to Haran and dwelt there. We turn to the map to look for Ur of the Chaldees, anxious to discover it as possibly Abraham's place of nativity, but find that the translators of God's inspired word have taken a slight liberty with the text by substituting "Ur of the Chaldees" for "Aur Kasdim," the latter being, in plain English, *the light of the magi, or conjurors, or astrologers*. אורכשדים is stated by Kalisch to have been made the basis for many extraordinary legends, as to Abraham's rescue from the flames. In the Talmud P'sachim, fol. 118, col. 1, it is written that "At the time when Nimrod the wicked had cast our Father Abraham into the fiery furnace, Gabriel stood forth in the presence of the Holy one — blessed be He! — and said, 'Lord of the universe, let me, I pray thee, go down and cool the furnace, and deliver that righteous one from it.'"

Abraham, being born — according to Hebrew chronology, 2,083 years after the creation, and according to the Septuagint 3,549 years after that event — when his father was seventy, grew so slowly that when his father reached the good old age of 205 years, Abraham had only arrived at 75 years, having, apparently, lost no less than 60 years' growth during his father's life-time. St. Augustine and St. Jerome gave this up as a difficulty inexplicable. Calmet endeavors to explain it, and makes it worse. It is surely impossible Abraham could have lived 135 years, and yet be only 75 years of age?

"The Lord" spoke to Abraham, and promised to make of him a great nation, to bless those who blessed Abraham, and to curse those who cursed him. I do not know precisely which Lord it was that spake unto Abraham, the Hebrew says it was יהוה Jeue, or, as our translators call it, Jehovah, but as God said (Exodus vi, 2) that by the name "Jehovah was I not known" to either Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, either the omniscient Deity had forgotten the matter, or a counterfeit Lord had assumed the name. The word Jehovah, which the book of Exodus says Abraham did not know, is nearly always the name by which Abraham addresses, or speaks of, the Jewish Deity.

Abraham having been promised protection by the God of Truth, initiated his public career with a diplomacy of statement

worthy Talleyrand. He represented his wife Sarah as his sister, which, if true, is a sad reproach to the marriage. The Talmud, when Abram came into Egypt, asks: "Where was Sarah? He confined her in a chest, into which he locked her, lest anyone should gaze on her beauty. When he came to the receipt of custom, he was summoned to open the chest, but declined, and offered payment of the duty. The officers said: 'Thou carryest garments;' and he offered duty for garments. 'Nay, it is gold thou carriest;' and he offered the impost laid on gold. Then they said: 'It is costly silks, belike pearls, thou concealest;' and he offered the custom on such articles. At length the Egyptian officers insisted, and he opened the box. And when he did so, all the land of Egypt was illumined by her beauty"(Bereshith Rabba, chap. 40). The ruling Pharaoh, hearing the beauty of Sarah commended, took her into his house, she being at that time a fair Jewish dame, between 60 and 70 years of age, and he entreated Abraham well for her sake, and he had sheep and oxen, asses and servants, and camels. We do not read that Abraham objected in any way to the loss of his wife. The Lord, who is all-just, finding out that Pharaoh had done wrong, not only punished the king, but also punished the king's household, who could hardly have interfered with his misdoings. Abraham got his wife back, and went away much richer by the transaction. Whether the conduct of father Abraham in pocketing quietly the price of the insult — or honor — offered to his wife, is worthy modern imitation, is a question only within the competence of episcopal authority. After this Abraham was very rich in "silver and gold." So was the Duke of Marlborough after the Duke of York had taken his sister in similar manner into his house. In Gen. xii, 19, there is a curious mistranslation in our version. The text is: "It is for that I had taken her for my wife;" our version has: "I *might have taken* her." The Douay so translates as to take a middle phrase, leaving it doubtful whether or not Pharaoh actually took Sarah as his wife. In any case, the Egyptian king acted far the better of the twain. Abraham plays the part of a timorous, contemptible hypocrite. Strong enough to have fought for his wife, he sold her. Yet Abraham is blessed, and his conduct is our pattern!

Despite his timorousness in the matter of his wife, Abraham was a man of wonderful courage and warlike ability. To rescue his relative, Lot — with whom he could not live on the same land without quarrelling, both being religious — he armed 318 servants, and fought with four powerful kings, defeating them and recovering the spoil. Abraham's victory was so decisive, that the King of Sodom, who fled and fell (xiv, 10) in a previous encounter, now met Abraham alive (see verse 17), to congratulate him on his victory. Abraham was also offered bread and wine by Melchisedek, King of Salem, priest of the Most High God. Where

was Salem? Some identify it with Jerusalem, which it cannot be, as Jebus was not so named until after the time of the Judges (Judges xix, 10). How does this King of this unknown Salem, never heard of before or after, come to be priest of the Most High God? These are queries for divines — orthodox disciples believe without inquiring. Melchisedek was most unique as far as genealogy is concerned. He had no father. He was without mother also; he had no beginning of days or end of life, and must be therefore at the present time an extremely old gentleman, who would be an invaluable acquisition to any antiquarian Bible Evidence Association fortunate enough to cultivate his acquaintance. God having promised Abraham a numerous family, and the promise not having been in any part fulfilled, the patriarch grew uneasy, and remonstrated with the Lord, who explained the matter thoroughly to Abraham when the latter was in a deep sleep, and a dense darkness prevailed. Religious explanations come with greater force under these or similar conditions. Natural or artificial light and clear-sightedness are always detrimental to spiritual manifestations.

Abraham's wife had a maid named Hagar, and she bore to Abraham a child named Ishmael; at the time Ishmael was born, Abraham was 86 years of age. Just before Ishmael's birth Hagar was so badly treated that she ran away. As she was only a slave, God persuaded Hagar to return and humble herself to her mistress. Thirteen years afterwards God appeared to Abraham, and instituted the rite of circumcision — which rite had been practised long before by other nations — and again renewed the promise. The rite of circumcision was not only practised by nations long anterior to that of the Jews, but appears in many cases not even to have been pretended as a religious rite. (See Kalisch, Genesis, p. 386; Cahen, Genese, p. 43.) After God had "left off talking with him, God went up from Abraham." As God is infinite, he did not, of course, go up; but still the Bible says God went up, and it is the duty of the people to believe that he did so, especially as the infinite Deity then and now resides habitually in "heaven" wherever that may be. Again the Lord appeared to Abraham, either as three men or angels or as one of the three, and Abraham, hospitably inclined, invited the three to wash their feet and to rest under the tree, and gave butter and milk and dressed calf, tender and good, to them, and they did eat; and after the enquiry as to where Sarah then was, the promise of a son is repeated. Sarah — then by her own admission an old woman, stricken in years — laughed when she heard this, and the Lord said: "Wherefore did Sarah laugh?" and Sarah denied it; but the Lord said: "Nay, but thou didst laugh." The three men then went toward Sodom, and Abraham with them as a guide; and the Lord explained to Abraham that some sad reports had reached him about Sodom and Gomorrah, and that he was then going to find out whether the report was

reliable. God is omnipresent, and was always therefore at Sodom and Gomorrah, but had apparently been temporarily absent; he is omniscient, and therefore knew everything which was happening at Sodom and Gomorrah, but he did not know whether or not the people were as wicked they had been represented to him. God, Job tells us, "put no trust in his servants, and his angels he charged with folly." Between the rogues and the fools, therefore, the all-wise and all-powerful God seems to be liable to be misled by the reports made to him. Two of the three men or angels went on to Sodom, and left the Lord with Abraham, who began to remonstrate with Deity on the wholesale destruction contemplated, and asked him to spare the city if fifty righteous should be found within it. God said: "If I find fifty righteous within the city, then will I spare the place for their sakes." God, being all-wise, knew there were not fifty in Sodom, and was deceiving Abraham. By dint of hard bargaining in thorough Hebrew fashion Abraham, whose faith seemed to be tempered by distrust, got the stipulated number reduced to ten, and then "the Lord went his way."

Jacob Ben Chajim, in his introduction to the Rabbinical Bible (p. 28), tells us that the Hebrew text used to read in verse 22: "And Jehovah still stood before Abraham;" but the scribes altered it, and made Abraham stand before the Lord, thinking the original text offensive to Deity.

Genesis xviii has given plenty of work to the divines. Augustine contended that God can take food, though he does not require it. Justin compared "the eating of God with the devouring power of the fire." Kalisch sorrows over the holy fathers "who have taxed all their ingenuity to make the act of eating compatible with the attributes of Deity."

In the Epistle to the Romans Abraham's faith is greatly praised. We are told (iv, 19 and 20) that: "Being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God." Yet, so far from Abraham giving God glory, Genesis xvii, 17, says that: "Abraham fell upon his face and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?" The Rev. Mr. Boutell says that "the declaration which caused Sarah to 'laugh' shows the wonderful familiarity which was then permitted to Abraham in his communications with God."

After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham journeyed south and sojourned in Gerar, and, either untaught or too well taught by his previous experience, again represented his wife as his sister, and Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah. As before, we find neither remonstrance nor resistance re-

corded on the part of Abraham. This time God punished the women in Abimelech's house for an offence they did not commit, and Sarah was again restored to her husband, with sheep, oxen, men-servants, women-servants, and money. Infidels object that the Bible says Sarah "was old and well stricken in age;" that "it had ceased to be with her after the manner of women;" that she was more than 90 years of age; and that it is not likely King Abimelech would fall in love with an ugly old woman; but if Genesis be true, it is clear that Sarah had not ceased to be attractive, as God resorted to especial means to protect her from Abimelech. At length Isaac was born, and his mother Sarah urged Abraham to expel Hagar and her son, "and the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son;" the mother being only a bondwoman does not seem to have troubled him. God, however, approving Sarah's notion, Hagar was expelled, "and she departed and wandered in the wilderness, and the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs." She had apparently carried the child, who — being at least more than 14, and according to some calculations as much as 17 years of age — must have been a heavy child to carry in a warm climate.

The Talmud says: "On the day when Isaac was weaned Abraham made a great feast, to which he invited all the people of the land. Not all of those who came to enjoy the feast believed in the alleged occasion of its celebration, for some said contemptuously, 'This old couple have adopted a foundling, and provided a feast to persuade us to believe that the child is their own offspring.' What did Abraham do? He invited all the great men of the day, and Sarah invited their wives, who brought their infants, but not their nurses, along with them. On this occasion Sarah's breasts became like two fountains, for she supplied, of her own body, nourishment to all the children. Still some were unconvinced, and said, 'Shall a child be born to one that is a hundred years old, and shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear?' (Gen. xvii, 17). Whereupon, to silence this objection, Isaac's face was changed, so that it became the very picture of Abraham's; then one and all exclaimed, 'Abraham begat Isaac'" (Bara Metzia, fol. 87, col. 1).

God never did tempt any man at any time, but he "did tempt Abraham" to kill Isaac by offering him as a burnt offering. The doctrine of human sacrifice is one of the holy mysteries of Christianity, as taught in the Old and New Testament. Of course, judged from a religious or Biblical stand-point, it cannot be wrong, as, if it were, God would not have permitted Jephtha to sacrifice his daughter by offering her as a burnt offering, nor have tempted Abraham to sacrifice his son, nor have said in Leviticus, "None devoted, which shall be devoted of men, shall be redeemed; but shall surely be put to death" (xxvii, 29), nor have in the New

Testament worked out the monstrous sacrifice of his only son Jesus, at the same time son and begetting father.

Abraham did not seem to be entirely satisfied with his own conduct when about to kill Isaac, for he not only concealed from his servants his intent, but positively stated that which was not true, saying, "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." If he meant that he and Isaac would come again to them, then he knew that the sacrifice would not take place. Nay, Abraham even deceived his own son, who asked him where was the lamb for the burnt offering? But we learn from the New Testament that Abraham acted in this and other matters "by faith," so his falsehoods and evasions, being results and aids of faith, must be dealt with in an entirely different manner from transactions of every day life. Just as Abraham stretched forth his hand to slay his son, the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and prevented the murder, saying, "Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son." This conveys the impression that up to that moment the angel of the Lord was not quite certain upon the subject.

In Genesis xiii God says to Abraham, "Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward. For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. Arise, walk through the land, in the length of it, and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee." Yet, as is admitted by the Rev. Charles Boutell, in his "Bible Dictionary," "The only portion of territory in that land of promise, of which Abraham became possessed," was a graveyard, which he had bought and paid for. Although Abraham was too old to have children *before* the birth of Isaac, he had many children after Isaac [was] born. He lived to "a good old age" and died "full of years," but was yet younger than any of those who preceded him, and whose ages are given in the Bible history, except Nahor.

According to the Talmud, as Abraham was very pious so were his very camels, for they would not enter into a place where there were idols (Avoth d' Rabbi Nathan, chap. 8).

Abraham gave "all that he had to Isaac," but appears to have distributed the rest of the property amongst his other children, who were sent to enjoy it somewhere down East.

According to the New Testament, Abraham is now in Paradise, but Abraham in heaven is scarcely an improvement upon Abraham on earth. When he was entreated by an unfortunate in hell for a drop of water to cool his tongue, father Abraham replied: "Son, remember that in thy lifetime thou receivedst thy good things, and now thou art tormented," as if the reminiscence of past good would alleviate present and future continuity of evil.

Rabbi Levi says that Abraham sits at the gate of hell and does not permit any circumcised Israelite to enter (Yalkut Shimoni, fol. 33, col. 2, sec. 18).

The Talmud declares that "Abraham was a giant of giants; his height was as that of *seventy-four* men put together. His food, his drink, and his strength were in the proportion of seventy-four men's to one man's. He built an iron city for the abode of his seventeen children by Keturah, the walls of which were so lofty that the sun never penetrated them; he gave them a bowl full of precious stones, the brilliancy of which supplied them with light in the absence of the sun "(Sophrim, chap. 21).

ENDNOTES

¹ The quotations are taken from Hershon's Talmudical Miscellany.

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